

December 15, Advent 3

Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18 *Consumption and the Good Life, part 1*

We are well into our Advent journey. We have gone deeper and deeper into the wilderness. From Jesus' apocalyptic words that rouse us from our comfort and sleep to John the Baptist's invitation to come out of the audience and onto the stage, preparing the way of the Lord by entering into the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The waiting work of Advent isn't quiet or passive; it's engaging and disturbing. And it won't get any easier today!

In today's Passage, John the Baptist's voice is relentless, calling us deeper into the baptism of repentance. "You brood of vipers," he begins.

Welcome to Advent 3. Welcome into the depths of the wilderness. Welcome to the counterscript that John is opening up for us. As a community of faith, we are ready for this!

"You brood of vipers."

These are John's words to the multitudes who have come into the wilderness to hear him preaching. Let's pause here a bit to appreciate this scene. Masses of people have left their homes, their neighborhoods, their friends and families to come into this Nowhere that is the wilderness so that they can get some of this Good News that John is preaching. What John is offering may be Good News, but baptism for the repentance of sin is hard news.

"You brood of vipers," he calls them. And they *stay* with him. He's telling them a hard truth about who they are—they're children of snakes. John is unrelenting as he pulls back the curtain on their illusions about who they are. They're under the illusion that they're children of God because they're Abraham and Sarah's brood. It's because of their *lineage*, they believe, that they're inheritors of God promises through the ages.

But John isn't having it. The truth is, he tells them, they've been formed by a lineage of poison, the lineage of the devious, slithery world around them. They've been formed, not by the loving-kindness and mercy of the Living God, but by the lies and deceit of empire. And it is precisely because the lies and deceit have become so oppressive, so burdensome, so binding and unworkable that they're now in the wilderness, looking for a way out of empire's domination. They're looking for the relief of a counterscript from John. John, a wild man, who's completely free of empire's domination and oppression. His liberation is grounded in God's love. So despite hearing the hard truth, they keep staying with John.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

How might we hear these words spoken to us? Into our context?

“You brood of vipers! ... Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Menno Simons as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to the radical Anabaptists.”

How are *we* a brood of vipers? What is the poison that has formed us? What are the lies and deceit that we, too, are inheriting? And what illusions does this inheritance create for us?

Like the multitudes so long ago, are we ready to leave it all and go into the Nowhere of the wilderness to hear the wild, undomesticated words of John the Baptist? Are we, with the crowds, staying with John, ready to hear more?

One of the sneaky lies that has been forming us is a lie about *consumption*. All around us in all kinds of ways and in all kinds of places, we see and hear scripts that say if we want to be happy, if we want to be free, if we want to live the *good life*, all we need to do is buy this or get that, have this, or have that. And especially at Christmas, if you want to have a good Christmas and your loved ones to know you love them, you have to give them something.

The scripts aren't just about consuming material things; they're also about *consuming* experiences, *getting* information, *having* knowledge. We human beings seem to be endlessly acquisitive, our appetites insatiable. We're seemingly always hungry for more, for something we don't yet have.

For me it is a way of being. I have spent my whole life waiting and wanting—to be a better person; to have a deeper experience and sense of repentance; to feel less bound by my sense of failure and sin; to have more joy and well-being. My life has been written by toxic lies that whisper that to live in the Kingdom of God, to live the *good life*, I have to first *get* the insights, *consume* more and deeper experiences of transformation, and *have* more and more of God.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance....Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The lies about consumption will not produce good fruit. There is no fruit that comes from *getting* and *having*. The lies about getting and having only serve to oppress us more and more. And so, with the crowds so long ago, we too ask, “What then should we do?” If John's words are true for us, and if we're not who we think we are, then *what should we do?* If our Mennonite heritage won't save us or can't prepare the way of the Lord, then *what should we do?* If we have been formed more by toxic and deadly lies than we've been aware of, then the revelation that *we are a brood of vipers* is, indeed, Good News. Hard news, but Good News.

“What then should we do?” When we hear the truth about who we are, about how we've been formed, our only response can be, “What then should we do?” And John, who has invited us onto the stage and into the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, answers our question: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and

whoever has food must do likewise.” [To the] tax collectors, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” [And to the soldiers,] “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

Notice that John doesn’t answer their question by telling them to *get* a new identity. They already have the only identity they need—being children of One God. In fact, there’s nothing for them *to get*. Nothing for them to have or consume. They already have everything they need. The answer to the lies that have been scripting their lives is a counterscript of sharing and kindness. Rather than consuming, John says that repentance for the forgiveness of sins is divesting. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins is giving themselves and their things to each other. *Give* to each other. *Share* your possessions with each other. *Give* kindness. *Give* compassion. *Give* justice and mercy. *Be* satisfied with what you have—it is enough.

When we enter into the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, when we leave the audience and get onto the stage, we stop waiting for someone else. When John tells them to go home, he’s telling them that “they are the change they’re waiting for.” By going home and inhabiting their lives, by giving themselves to each other, by sharing and offering mercy and kindness, they are changing the systems of oppression and domination.

In the Philippians Passage, Paul also answers the question, “What then should we do?” His response: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

John’s unrelenting style of truth-telling is intimidating, discomfoting, confronting. And inspiring. There’s no place to hide when we listen to him.

Or is there?

I have a sense that we who are the brood of Menno Simons have been hiding behind our frugal, thrifty ways. By most standards, we don't consume much. We have, after all, been formed by the script of "more with less." We know how to share. We know how to do community. We're responsive to the needs around us, locally and globally. We give MCC kits. We host relief sales to give money away. We reuse and reduce and recycle.

So for some of us, the sneaky lies of consumption might be that we're already doing what John tells the crowds to do. We're already sharing our coats with others. But I wonder about the ways that consumption has shaped our "more with less" practices, our sense of discipleship, our expectations of worship, our hope for the *good life*, for living on earth as in heaven.

I wonder if the counterscript that John is offering is both more subtle and more difficult than giving away half of our clothes and right ethics. We have a deep desire to get it right, to live "rightly." Do you hear the subtle lie? Our desire is scripting us, not God's desire, but my own need, my own want. We *want* more of God, we *want* to experience the holy, to *have* the presence of God. Is our desire for God—our desire for experiences that assure God's presence is with us—more about *consumption* than about incarnation? Than about *Emmanuel*?

The truth is, we are already God's. God has us. That's our first and true and eternal identity. And John is telling us to go home. Go, live into the reality that we are already God's, into the reality that the Living God is already and always with us, with all creatures, in all creation.

To these people who have left their homes and their work to come into the Nowhere of the wilderness, John says, "Go home. Go back to your families and your communities. Go back to your work and your vocations. You *are* children of the Living God. You are God's. You *have* God's love. You *have* God's grace and mercy and forgiveness. Go home and be at

home in your lives. Be kind, generous. Be loving with each other, with all others. Be merciful and just.” For John, this is fruit worthy of repentance.

The baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins isn’t something to get or consume—it’s something to live. It’s a way of *being* in the daily-ness and ordinary-ness of our lives. Preparing the way of the Lord isn’t something to get or consume in some holy wilderness experience. God is already with us—wherever we are and everywhere we are—God is with us, and it is holy. There is nothing for us to get or consume in order to bear fruit worthy of repentance—good fruit is the Spirit of God’s gift to us and to all creation.

May we go home. May we live—each day, each moment—into the reality that we are God’s. And because we are God’s, because we are Gods, we are enough. We have enough.